

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT August 2008:

Toxic Plants in and around our home

Summer in Virginia is a paradise of lush foliage and beautiful flowers! But beware: ingestion of plants and berries by children is one of the top reasons for calls to the Blue Ridge Poison Center. Young children are very attracted to all the pretty colors and soft leaves, and most plants are within reach of their eager hands. Fortunately, serious poisoning from plants is rare in children, because the quantity of plant material required to cause serious poisoning is often greater than what a child may eat at one time. Nevertheless, caregivers should take note of what plants growing around their home are toxic and keep a watchful eye on children when outdoors.

There are 4 main types of toxic plants:

- 1) Some plants contain *calcium oxalate crystals*, or microscopic sharp crystals that can cause burning pain and swelling of the mouth and throat if eaten. Serious swelling could block the airway. Many houseplants fall into this category. Examples include peace lily, jack-in-the-pulpit, philodendron, and dieffenbachia (dumbcane).
- 2) Some contain *soluble oxalate salts*, chemicals which can damage the kidneys or other organs. Examples include shamrocks and related *oxalis* species, rhubarb leaves (the stems are non-toxic), and Virginia creeper.
- 3) Some contain toxins that cause mild to moderate skin irritation (especially in the eyes and mouth) if handled, and nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea when eaten. Examples include daffodils, tulips, clematis, pokeberry, and yarrow.
- 4) The most dangerous plants have chemicals which cause serious symptoms as they are distributed throughout the body after ingestion. Severe vomiting and diarrhea, changes in heart rhythm, seizures, respiratory failure, or organ damage could result, depending on the plant and how much gets into the body. Some examples include foxglove, castor bean seeds, oleander, and the green parts of eggplant and potato plants.

For a more complete list of toxic plants native to Virginia, visit the Blue Ridge Poison Center's website: <http://www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/internet/brpc/education/adults.cfm>

Experts at the Blue Ridge Poison Center recommend these plant safety tips:

- Learn the name of every tree, shrub, plant, and houseplant growing in and around your home. If an unintentional ingestion does occur, the poison center will be able to help you faster if they don't have to first try to identify the plant over the phone.
- If you have small children, consider removing toxic species from your home and yard until children are older.
- Remind children often that it is not safe to eat plants or berries they find growing outdoors or inside.
- Remember: many plants are poisonous to animals, too. Don't allow pets to chew or eat plants in the home or yard.
- If you suspect that someone has been exposed to a toxic plant, call the Blue Ridge Poison Center immediately. Do not wait for symptoms to develop.
1-800-222-1222. Cell users call 1-800-451-1428.

Note to media: If you are interested in following up on this announcement, please contact the Dept. of Media Relations at the Uva Health System: 434-243-2734. Thank you!